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131842Z Nov 04

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HALIFAX 000255

SIPDIS

FOR WHA/CAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [CA](#)

SUBJECT: PROVINCIAL POLITICS IN ATLANTIC CANADA: WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT

11. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY: This fall has proven to be a busy season for provincial politicians in Atlantic Canada. Minority governments, shortened legislative sessions, by-elections, and party leadership changes have combined to create more attention than usual on what's going on both inside and outside the four legislatures. Accordingly, we have taken a snapshot look at each of the provinces showing the situation in each with a few predictions on what's in store for the region.

12. Both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are facing minority governments suggesting a decline in the Conservative Party's sway in these provinces. In N.B. the Liberals are the strongest potential challenger, while in N.S. it is the NDP. In the short term neither of these provincial governments seem likely to be overturned, but in the longer term observers should not be surprised to see electoral change. In Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island the Conservative leadership is experiencing more popularity. Only in Newfoundland could the popularity be fleeting, pending the Premier's success in negotiations with Ottawa. Thus it will be interesting to watch whether the potential fall of the Conservatives in N.B. or N.S. will shake the popularity of the Conservatives in PEI and Newfoundland and Labrador. END INTRODUCTION/SUMMARY

New Brunswick

13. Lt. Governor Herminigilde Chiasson (Appointed for a five year term on August 26, 2003)

Premier: Bernard Lord (Party: Progressive Conservatives)
Most recent election: June 9, 2003
Current Party Standings in the House (55 seats in total)
 Progressive Conservatives 28
 (Leader: Bernard Lord since October 18, 1997)
 Liberals 26
 (Leader: Shawn Graham since May 11, 2002)
 New Democrats 1
 (Leader: Elizabeth Weir since 1988)

Election history: Bernard Lord and his Conservative party have ruled New Brunswick since they overturned the incumbent Liberals in the June 1999 election.

Current political scene: While portrayed as a rising star on the national political stage, Conservative Premier Bernard Lord is suffering from popularity problems with the folks at home. Lord's tough policy decisions on health care reform have created widespread unrest throughout the province and have stirred up serious dissension in the party ranks over how the Premier handled contentious issues such as hospital bed closures and downgrading hospitals. Helping to fan the flames of discontent is Liberal Opposition leader Shawn Graham, now openly talking of bringing down the government in the next legislative session of the house.

The possibility of an eventual non-confidence motion has led Graham to institute a series of personnel changes in his caucus office including the addition of a new chief of staff whose principal job will be to prepare the party for battle with the Conservatives. However, the Liberals are still struggling with a credibility problem among the electorate. Hesitancy is thus the play of the day, with some Liberal rank and file calling for restraint in order to allow the party to build up more momentum before forcing a new election. The NDP is similarly reluctant to bring down the current government. The current NDP leader Elizabeth Weir, who holds the party's only seat in the house, recently announced her resignation as leader, although there is no date yet for a convention to pick a replacement. All things considered, this will make the next New Brunswick legislative session the one to watch in the region.

Nova Scotia

14. Lt. Governor: Myra A. Freeman (Appointed for a five year term on April 28, 2000)
Premier: John F. Hamm (Party: Progressive Conservatives-PC)
Most Recent Election: August 5, 2003
Party Standings in the House (52 seats in total)

Progressive Conservatives 25

(Leader: John F. Hamm since October 28, 1995)

Liberals 12

(Leader: Francis Mackenzie since October 23, 2004)

New Democrats 15

(Leader: Darrell Dexter since June 4, 2001)

Election History: John Hamm and his Conservatives have been governing Nova Scotia since July 1999 when they defeated the incumbent Liberal government by a wide majority.

Current political scene: Like his counterpart in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia premier John Hamm is in a precarious minority situation, although the opposition is split with the NDP forming the official opposition and the Liberals in third place. The NDP has done very well in the province, offering a cooperative attitude in working with the incumbent Tories to keep the government afloat.

With the NDP viewed as a credible alternative to the ruling Tories, the Liberals appear destined to remain in third place. The Liberals have been plagued with weak leadership and this does not seem to have changed with the recent newly elected leader, Francis MacKenzie. MacKenzie does not have a seat in the legislature and will likely have to wait until another general election before he has a chance to enter the house. Thus it seems that John Hamm's popularity may be slipping and this will likely work in favor of the NDP leaving the Liberals to cool their heels for the time being.

Newfoundland-Labrador

15. Lt. Governor Edward M. Roberts (Appointed for a five year term on November 1, 2002)

Premier: Danny Williams (Party: Progressive Conservatives-PC)

Most recent election: October 21, 2003

Party Standings in the House (48 seats in total)

Conservatives 34

(Leader: Danny Williams since April 7, 2001)

Liberals 12

(Leader: Roger Grimes since February 3, 2001)

New Democrats 2

(Leader: Jack Harris since November, 1992)

Election History: With their win in the October 2003 provincial election, Premier Williams and his Tories upset a 12-year long Liberal administration.

Current political scene: Premier Danny Williams recently celebrated his first-year anniversary, but he admits that it has been a tough year. After reviewing the province's fiscal situation last year, Williams said he had no choice but to institute tough measures to bring the province's fiscal situation under control and enduring a contentious public sector strike. While fiscal watchers applauded the government's tough stance, the measures left the government shaken. However, Williams has seen a surge in popularity with his firm stance with the federal government on a revenue sharing agreement on offshore energy projects. Should Williams get his way in this current dispute with Ottawa, it would be the crowning achievement for Williams and one that even opposition leader Roger Grimes admits he would applaud. Due to the popularity of Williams' position on revenue sharing, Grimes and the two NDP members have been forced to instead zero in on Williams' personal style of one-man showmanship, hence their new name for the Premier, the "Daniator."

Prince Edward Island

16. Lt. Governor J. Lionce Bernard (Appointed for a five year term on May 28, 2001)

Premier: Patrick George Binns (Party: Progressive Conservatives)

Most Recent Election: September 29, 2003

Party Standings in the House (27 seats in total)

Conservatives

(Leader: Patrick George Binns since May 4, 1996)

Liberals

(Leader: Robert Ghiz since April 5, 2003)

Election History: Pat Binns and the Conservatives have been governing Prince Edward Island since 1996 when they overturned a 10-year incumbent Liberal government

Current political scene: Premier Pat Binns is enjoying continued support from Islanders, making it difficult for Liberal Opposition Leader Robert Ghiz to make many inroads. In fact, pundits believe that it would take the eventual retirement of the popular Binns to open up any opportunities for Ghiz. As for the NDP, the party has never elected a member either federally or provincially, and still appears unprepared to make any headway.

17. COMMENT: In the last decade the Atlantic Provinces have borne witness to the almost universal defeat in provincial legislatures of the previously dominant Liberal Party in favor

of the Progressive Conservatives. At the federal level, however, the story has been different: in the June 2004 election the Liberals took a significant majority of the region's seats in the Parliament in Ottawa. The question to ask while watching the Atlantic Provinces in future will be whether this "spell" of Conservatism was simply an attempt on the part of Atlantic Canadians to express their dissatisfaction with the perceived financial irresponsibility of provincial Liberal governments or whether this is indicative of a general shift in ideology.

18. The decline in the popularity of the Conservatives in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick indicates that the former may be the more accurate analysis, however the situation is less clear in the other two Atlantic Provinces. If the past few years were just a warning, then watchers will likely see a return to the center following a restructuring and redefinition of the alternative parties. As mentioned, the province to watch will be New Brunswick, both because the politics are interesting in themselves, but also because N.B. could be the bellwether for a more general trend away from the Tories in provincial legislatures.
END COMMENT

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